Father Legend

The old Jewish cemetery of Ihumen
in thick wild grass, abandoned.
I have not come to this old cemetery
to curse or to lament,
but to receive a blessing
from under a mound.
Autumn. Moss on the mound,
sun on the moss.
All of my limbs –
the strings of an instrument –
and moving over the strings – a hand
of someone who rises from death
and comes back to life:
"Son, you are here.
Good. Good.
Your smile – let it rise
not over these graves, but gardens.
My blood pours out in this sunshine –
overflows into another body.
Who is this other body –
Tree – the tree in the forest is this other body,
threshold – the threshold of our home on Berezene St.
is this other body.
Oh, my boy, my boy –
It is I, your father,
I with the red beard.
Let your hands carry every touch of mine,
let your lips carry my kisses,
kisses I wanted to give you,
that I should have given you,

but always shame held me back,
and also my words,
which in my poverty and in my sadness
stammered – –
Lying under the earth
I have seen light from your life,
light from your heart,
opening to me only after death.
Lying under the earth
I have heard all of your cries,
seen all of the pain and suffering
of each new daybreak
in your remote and lowered eyes.
Lift your eyes and see
how much light is over you,
over our poor home
where you gave your first cry
in white, legendary Kislev.
Lying under the earth,
light opened up to me,
truth revealed itself to me –
that on the day you will come
(and I knew that you would, that you must!)
I will receive you
with clear,
good,
lucent words."

So spoke my father
from the grave.

DAVID EINHORN
(1886–1973)

THE LAST TO SING

The last to sing before the Ark is dead.
Padlocks hang in the house of the Jews.
The windows are boarded, and shadows
huddle in shame in the pews.

Bereavement without end
creeps on the naked walls,
and blazoned crown and priestly hands
lie broken above the Scrolls.

The last to sing before the Law is dead.
There is no one now to go up to the Ark.
The eternal flame, alone in its nook,
struggles and sputters to dark.

And soundless on the steps of the Ark
the abandoned *Shekhina* rests,
her head bowed down in sorrow,
black as night her dress.

And her lips seem to shudder
a last hushed plea,
as if the Ark from its arras had spoken:
Too late, too late, O you who are faithful to Me!

Cynthia Ozick

Mani Leyb

(1883 - 1953)

A Plum

In the cool evening the owner
pulled a ripe plum from the tree
and with it a leaf.
He bit into the dewy

blue skin and the slumbrous juice
burst coolly into his grip. To keep
the full juiciness – and not lose a drop –
he slowly carried it, the way one

cradles a cup of wine in both
hands, and gently lifted it
to his wife's lips. Lovingly, she

thanked him and gnawed
the plum in his hands down
to skin and pit and speckled pulp.

Anna Margolin

(1887 - 1952)

My Tribe Speaks

My tribe:

Men in satin and velvet,
long faces of pale silk,
lips – entranced, glowing like coal;
their hands caressing yellowed tomes.
Deep in the night they talk to God.

Merchants from Leipsk and Dansk.
Gleaming cuffs. Elegant cigar smoke.
Gemorah witticisms. German civilities.
Glances shrewd and opaque,
shrewd and sated.
Don Juans, dealers, and seekers of God.

A drunk;
some apostates in Kiev.

My tribe:

Women, like idols garnished with jewels,
turning garnet from Turkish shawls,
from the dark pleats of satin-de-Lyons.
The flesh is a sobbing willow,

fingers lie in the lap, like dry flowers,
and in the fading, veiled eyes
dead desire.

Grande-damen in calico and linen,
broad-boned and strong, making their moves
with cynical light laughter,
with calm speech and uncanny silence.
At dusk by the window of a poor house
they appear like statues,
and in their twilight eyes shudder
savage desires.

A man and a wife
I'm ashamed to talk about.

All of them – my tribe,
blood of my blood,
flame of my flame,
the dead and the living mixed;
sad, grotesque, large,
they tramp through me as through a dark house,
tramp with prayers and curses and laments.
They shake my heart like a copper bell,
my tongue quivering.
I don't recognize my own voice –
my tribe speaks.

Uri Zvi Greenberg

(1894 - 1981)

Recognition

And not just those, who speak as I speak
and pray to the same God of the patriarchs
when stars come out or light glows in the east,
are my only brothers –

But also those, who, in quivering moments,
when stars rise and dark orphanhood
falls from all worlds on the beaten paths,
wander quietly, lonesome as shadows,
and long for four walls and a ceiling,
heads bent,
lips murmuring…

And not just those who wrap themselves in prayer shawls
for *Shakhres*, when golden light pours outside,
and bells ring from the church belfries,
and the pious Jews cannot unite with the divine in their thoughts
because the clanging of the bells unhinges their concentration –

Shakhres – Jewish morning prayers

But also those, who fall, covered in dust,
somewhere amid fields of white crosses,
and who want to pour themselves out, like waves of water –
their hands wringing,
mouths in the grass…

And not just those, whose virgin bodies
no eyes see, except their mothers' eyes
and the white walls of their parents' dwelling,
are my only sisters –
but also those, whose wanton bodies
are like trees on the windblown Steppes,
and who stroll streets in the blazing noon sun,
and as late as midnight, though it's raining,
and have no tears for their misfortune…

And not just those, who cut their hair
on those gray mornings after weddings,
in the restfulness of sweet homes, God, faith,
and can unite with their husbands, who have immersed themselves
in the *mikve* –
but also those who, during November nights filled with sadness,
in the blinding ocean-lights of electric lamps,
in the raucous buzz of foreign soldier-voices,
drink beer after beer and let the drunkards
wildly have their way…

And not just people with deep souls,
who have eyes, hearts, and lips,
into whose intimacy I can pour out my heart,
are my only friends –
but also abandoned dogs, who scamper,
looking for little bones under butcher blocks,
and from a distance I squeak to one of them:
"Psst, psst." He comes and climbs up my knees
and we look in each other's eyes…

And not even just dogs,
who yowl under fences in the moonlight,
when my heart can't contain itself and pours
into an ocean of chants and prayer-tears,
are my only friends –
but also God's beings that are silent:
wild oaks in remote forests;
gray cliffs,
ready to be embraced…